

CIVIL
RELIGION
in POLITICAL
THOUGHT

Its Perennial Questions
and Enduring Relevance in
North America

Edited by

RONALD WEED &
JOHN VON HEYKING

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Truth versus Utility

The Debate on Civil Religion in the Roman Empire of the Third and Fourth Centuries

MATTHIAS RIEDL

One of John Stuart Mill's late essays is entitled "The Utility of Religion" and starts as follows: "It has sometimes been remarked how much has been written, both by friends and enemies, concerning the truth of religion, and how little, at least in the way of discussion or controversy, concerning its usefulness."¹ A few lines later, he adds: "The utility of religion did not need to be asserted until the arguments for its truth had in a great measure ceased to convince."² Mill is right in one respect; truth and utility are two essentially different ways of looking at religion. But he is wrong to claim that the question of the utility of religion arises later in history than the question of its truth. Both questions have a 2,000-year-old history in Western civilization.

The first major clash between the two perspectives happened in the third and fourth centuries A.D., when a new Latin-speaking Christian intelligentsia started to question the rationale behind Roman civil religion. However, if we read the literature of early Western Christianity we are confronted with a curious phenomenon, namely the seemingly irreconcilable difference between the picture of the pagan cult, as drawn by Christian authors of this period, and the picture of non-Christian religiosity, as presented to us by modern scholarship. Regardless of whether we read the earliest documents of Latin apologetic literature, such as Tertullian and

1. John Stuart Mill, *Three Essays on Religion* (Amherst, Mass.: Prometheus, 1998), 69.

2. *Ibid.*, 70.

Minucius Felix, written around 200, or Augustine's *The City of God*, written in the early fifth century, the authors give us the impression that the pagans still worshiped Jupiter, Mars, Minerva, Venus, and all the other deities of the traditional polytheist pantheon. Modern historians, on the other hand, tell us that by the third century, the majority of the non-Christians in the Roman Empire had turned to what is generally known as "the oriental mystery cults," such as the Persian Mithras, the Egyptian Isis, and the variations of the Syrian solar cult. Only a small pagan minority, mostly members of the senate aristocracy, kept defending the cult of their ancestors. However, many of the Christian treatises show only minor concern for the mystery cults, which must have been a more serious rival in the competition for the religious orientation of the masses.³ So the question arises: why, centuries after the decline of the republic and, in the case of Augustine, even decades after the supposed Constantinian or Theodosian turns, did republican civil religion remain the chief frame of reference of the religio-political debates?

The solution to the problem seems to be that the chief enemy the authors had in mind was indeed the small pagan aristocracy. But this is again a phenomenon that requires explanation. I can offer two preliminary answers: First, because of the exoteric character of the gospel, Christianity sought to conquer the public sphere, where it confronted not the mystery cults but Roman civil religion. Second, a literary controversy was possible only with pagans who, to a certain extent, had enjoyed the same education. Almost all Christian authors were educated as pagans and converted to Christianity as adults, Ambrose of Milan being one of the few exceptions. Tertullian and Minucius Felix started their careers as lawyers, and Arnobius, Lactantius, and Augustine as rhetoricians. Since both sides shared the same educational background they drew most of their categories and examples from the classics, first of all Varro, Cicero, Sallust, Livy, and Virgil—except the latter, all authors praised the pious cult of the earlier republican times and regarded their own time as an era of religious crisis.

3. The book *De errore profanarum religionum* by Firmicus Maternus seems to be a remarkable exception since it provides detailed reports about the mystery cults. Although the title might suggest otherwise, the book does not belong to the context of the pagan-Christian debate. Rather, it aims to inform the Christian successors of Emperor Constantine the Great about the existing pagan cults, which, in the eyes of the author, the emperors are obliged to destroy (Firmicus Maternus, *The Error of the Pagan Religions*, trans. Clarence A. Forbes, *Ancient Christian Writers* 37 (New York: Newman Press, 1970)).

In this intellectual controversy, it appears that the main argument of the pagans for the preservation of the civil religion is its political utility. The Christians, on the other hand, insist on the truth of their revelation, which does not allow them to support the official cult. Yet, as I intend to show, the dividing lines between the proponents of utility and the proponents of truth are not as clear as they appear at first sight. Instead of giving a survey of the relevant literature, which would necessarily remain rather general and superficial, I offer two examples, which do not cover all aspects of the debate on civil religion in the third and fourth century but seem representative of two distinct historical situations: the dialogue *Octavius* by Minucius Felix illustrates the defensive character of the apologetic literature in the pre-Constantinian era, whereas the debate between Symmachus and Ambrose over the altar of victory shows the pagan defenders of civil religion struggling against the power of the new Christian elites.

Minucius Felix

The dialogue *Octavius* was written by the otherwise unknown author Minucius Felix in the first half of the third century. The opening scene describes the author and his two friends, the Christian Octavius and the pagan Caecilius, promenading along the beach of Ostia near Rome. As they leave the city and pass an image of Serapis, an Egyptian god recently added to the pantheon of the official cult, the pagan makes a gesture of veneration. Octavius, the Christian, immediately accuses him of superstition, and so the discussion starts. The dialogue is, of course, not the protocol of a discussion that actually happened, and probably it was read only by Christians. However, I am convinced that it reflects a real debate. Written in a time when the Christians were still a minority, it provided arguments that Christian intellectuals could use to defend themselves and to convince others. For this purpose, Minucius Felix had to draw a realistic picture of the pagan intellectual.

Before the pagan Caecilius, who gives the first speech in the dialogue, begins his attack on Christianity, he praises the utility of civil religion. His main argument is the close relation between the receptivity of the Roman cult for new gods and the military success of the empire:

[Rome] has propagated its empire beyond the paths of the sun, and the bounds of the ocean itself; in that in their arms they practice a religious valor; in that

they fortify their city with the religions of sacred rites . . . ; in that, when besieged and taken, all but the Capitol alone, they worship the gods which when angry any other people would have despised; and through the lines of the Gauls . . . they move unarmed with weapons, but armed with the worship of their religion; while in the city of an enemy, when taken while still in the fury of victory, they venerate the conquered deities; while in all directions they seek for the gods of the strangers, and make them their own. . . . Thus, in that they acknowledge the sacred institutions of all nations, they have also deserved their dominion.⁴

Caecilius concludes that the traditional cult had always protected and strengthened the city. However, its receptivity and tolerance reaches its limits when it comes to Christianity. The way Caecilius describes the dangerous character of the Christian community includes almost all common stereotypes. He accuses the Christians of gathering in secret meetings, where they perform cruel sacrifices, including the worshiping of animals and the killing of children, as well as abnormal sexual practices, especially incest.

Yet the far more interesting fact is that the vocabulary used for these accusations includes a number of key words that would have been immediately understood by every educated contemporary. Caecilius asserts that the Christians "establish a herd of a profane conspiracy [*profana coniuratio*] which is leagued together by nightly meetings . . . not by any sacred rite [*sacrum*], but by sinful crime [*piaculum*]."⁵ According to a modern editor of the dialogue, this is "the almost standard jargon to describe contemptuously any clandestine religious sect."⁶ Caecilius also says: "I know not whether these things are false; certainly suspicion is applicable to secret and nocturnal rites."⁷ The expression "secret and nocturnal rites" (*occulta et nocturna sacra*) is literally taken from the thirty-ninth book of Livy's Roman history, as are the opposition of *sacrum* and *piaculum* and a number of other concepts.⁸

In this book, Livy reports on the scandal of the Bacchanals that occurred four hundred years earlier, after the Second Punic War.⁹ We can

4. Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, trans. G. W. Clarke, Ancient Christian Writers 39 (New York: Newman Press, 1974), 6,2-3. Latin quotes are taken from Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, Lateinisch-Deutsch ed., ed. Bernhard Kytzler (München: Kösel, 1965).

5. Ibid., 8,4.

6. Ibid., note 106.

7. Ibid., 9,4.

8. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* XXXIX,8 and XXXIX,18.

9. Ironically, the Christian Firmicus Maternus uses the persecution of the Bacchantes as an exemplary model for measures that the Christian emperors of the Constantinian dynasty should take against the pagan cults (Firmicus Maternus, *De errore profanarum religionum*. VI,9).

learn from the work of Minucius that contemporary pagans attempted to construe a parallel between the Bacchanals and the Christian gatherings. The motive is easily discerned. Before (under Emperor Decius) systematic persecutions of the Christians were enacted, the Roman authorities and most emperors hesitated to bring Christians to trial because such measures lacked legal grounds.¹⁰ Worshiping the "wrong" god was not a crime. If, however, the anti-Christian propaganda could successfully show that the case of the Christians equals the case of the Bacchanals, it would have provided a justification for judicial measures. The case of the Bacchanals was widely regarded as the precedent for religious persecution; and the authoritative historian, Livy, confirmed that the persecution was a necessary and legitimate means for protecting the social and religious order of the Roman republic.

Livy tells us that in 186 B.C., a consul conducted investigations into the Bacchanals and presented the following results before the senate: A certain time after the Bacchanals were introduced in Rome as a cult for female initiates, a priestess altered the rules. Henceforth, rites were performed secretly at night, and male adolescents were initiated to the cult:

From the time when the rites were held promiscuously, with men and women mixed together, and when the license offered by darkness had been added, no sort of crime, no kind of immorality was left unattempted. There were more obscenities practised between men than between men and women. . . . To regard nothing as forbidden was among these people the summit of religious achievement. . . . There was . . . a vast number of initiates, and by this time they almost made up a second people.¹¹

After further official inquiries, the senate issued a decree. Due to fortunate circumstances, the text of that decree was handed down to us and is preserved on a bronze tablet, currently located in the *Kunstgeschichtliche Museum* in Vienna. We can therefore be certain that the core of Livy's story is based on facts. Recent archaeological discoveries have shown that exactly at this time a temple dedicated to Bacchus was violently destroyed.¹² We

10. Jochen Bleicken, *Verfassungs- und Sozialgeschichte des Römischen Kaiserreiches*, vol. 2, 3rd ed. (Paderborn: Schöningh 1994), 167-74.

11. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* XXXIX,13, in Livy, *Rome and the Mediterranean. Books XXXI-XLV of the History of Rome from Its Foundation*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 1976).

12. Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1:93.

do not know how many people were actually killed, exiled, or put in jail during the persecutions, but they must have been in the thousands.¹³ In the end, the cult was more or less eliminated.

The senatorial decree and Livy's account give us a number of reasons why the Bacchanals were unacceptable. At the same time, they reveal deep insights into the character of Roman civil religion. It is obvious that truth was not an issue, since the senators did not doubt the existence of the god Bacchus. Certainly the senators could not neglect the stories about excessive drunkenness and abnormal sexual practices. However, their main concern was the novelty that the Bacchants constituted a religious community of their own.¹⁴ Traditionally, the most important religious community of Rome was the *Civitas*, the community of the citizens, itself. A clear distinction between religion and politics was unknown. The aristocratic families who dominated politics throughout the republican era also held most of the important priesthoods and supervised the *sacra publica*, sacred public affairs.¹⁵ Their political influence was enormous. According to their specific responsibilities, the different religious authorities, the *pontifices*, the *augures*, and the *haruspices*, were consulted before virtually every political decision.¹⁶ The college of the pontiffs also controlled the non-public area of the Roman religion, the *sacra privata*, the worship of the family gods. At the beginning of a speech Cicero once gave before the college of the pontiffs, he summed up the religio-political order of the republic:

Among the many divinely-inspired expedients of government established by our ancestors, there is none more striking than that whereby they expressed intention that the worship of the gods and the vital interests of the state should be entrusted to the direction of the same individuals (*eosdem et religionibus deorum immortalium et summae rei publicae praesesse voluerunt*), to the end that citizens of the highest distinction and the brightest fame might achieve the welfare of religion by a wise administration of the state, and of the state by a sage interpretation of religion (*religiones sapienter interpretando rem publicam conservarent*).¹⁷

13. Livy says, "more than 7,000 men and women were involved in the conspiracy"; and "[t]he people executed outnumbered those who were thrown into prison" (Livy, *Ab urbe condita* XXX-IX.17-18, 412-13).

14. John A. North, *Roman Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 65.

15. *Ibid.*, 21-34.

16. *Ibid.*, 29-30.

17. Cicero, *De domo sua* 1.1, in Cicero, *The Speeches*, trans. N. H. Watts, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press/William Heinemann, 1965), 133.

From this perspective, it is understandable that a religious group, which established its own leadership, its own loyalties, and its own funds, was unacceptable. Therefore, the senate decreed, in the case of the Bacchanals:

No man shall be a priest. No man nor woman shall be a master. None of them shall seek to have money in common. No one shall seek to appoint either man or woman as master or acting master, or seek to create mutual guarantees. No one shall seek to perform rites in secret, nor shall anyone seek to perform rites in public or private or outside the city, unless he . . . is given permission with a senatorial decree, so long as not less than one hundred senators are present when the matter is considered.¹⁸

To us moderns, this decision might appear to be a purely political decision in order to eliminate competing elites. Yet, as Livy tells us, the Bacchanals were seen as a threat not just against the political order of the city, but also against religion.¹⁹ In fact, the two charges were inseparable. According to the British historian J. A. North, there "is a sense in which the gods and goddesses of Rome were citizens belonging to the city just as much as the human citizens and participating in its triumphs and defeats as well as in its rituals."²⁰ Moreover, the relations between gods and humans were described in exactly the same terms as the social relations between the citizens, such as between patrons and clients. One of the key concepts is *procuratio*, care. A recent study on social relations in the Roman Republic describes the concept as follows: "Cicero and other authors frequently use the terms *procuratio* (or variants) to denote political responsibilities or to describe the care of the gods over human affairs. By far the most attestations of the term *procurator* denote anyone who takes care (*procurare*) of the affairs of others, regardless of whether these affairs are economic, social, political or religious."²¹

In other words, the Roman citizen experienced his existence as participation in a system of care. Cicero, the *Homo Novus*, offers the most profound intellectual penetration of the existence of the Roman aristocrat. In his *Republic*, the hero Scipio says that there is one single task (*opus*) he in-

18. Cited from Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 2:291; for the Latin text see *Fontes Iuris Romani Anteiustiniani. Pars Prima: Leges*, ed. Salvator Riccobono (Florence: S.A.G. Barbèra, 1968), 240-41.

19. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* XXXIX.16.

20. North, *Roman Religion*, 37.

21. Koenraad Verboven, *The Economy of Friends: Economic Aspects of Amicitia and Patronage in the Late Republic* (Brussels: Éditions Latomus, 2002), 230.

herited from his parents, namely the care for and administration of the Res Publica (*procuratio atque administratio rei publicae*).²² But also on the other levels of the social order, virtually including the gods, care for others was more or less identical with the meaning of existence. The Patres Familias cared for their families, the patrons for their clients, the patricians for the Res Publica, and the gods for the welfare of the citizens and the success of the political and military leaders. In this order, there was no place for a religion that constituted an alternative society, a second people (*alter populus*), as Livy writes,²³ whose purpose was not the care for the family or the Res Publica but the individual experience of the divine and happiness in the afterlife.²⁴ In the eyes of the senators, the cult therefore ruined the commonwealth, the families, the religion, and, first of all, the virtue that bound all elements of the Roman order together: piety (*pietas*), the dutifulness and loyalty to parents, patrons, ancestors, and gods, to all the authorities on whose care one depends. We find exactly the same charge in the dialogue of Minucius Felix. The pagan Caecilius sums up his accusations with the conclusion that Christians are an impious community (*impia coitio*).²⁵

According to an old myth, polytheism is by definition tolerant, and monotheism is the origin of intolerance. The Bacchanals, however, provide a good example for the limits of polytheistic toleration and help us to understand the suspicion of Christian communities. Religious toleration is, in the first place, not a question of polytheism or monotheism. Toleration is possible as long as the constitutive self-understanding of a society is not endangered, as long as the logic of the political order, from which the dominant part of the society derives the meaning of its existence, is not questioned. Exactly this happened in Rome, when Bacchants and Christians established communities seeking otherworldly beatitude and establishing their own leadership, instead of trusting in the joint efforts of gods and patricians in securing the public good of the Civitas. Even though neither in the case of the Bacchanals nor in the case of the early Christianity was a political program clearly discernible, the establishment of an alternative social order could only be perceived as a conspiracy against the Res Publica.²⁶

22. Cicero, *De re publica*, I, 22, 36.

23. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* XXXIX, 13.

24. Concern for an otherworldly existence was, however, an important feature of the Dionysian mysteries already in the fifth century B.C. (Walter Burkert, *Antike Mysterien* (München: Beck, 1991), 27).

25. Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 9, 1.

26. On the charge of conspiracy (*coniuratio*), see Wilhelm Nippel, "Orgien, Ritualmorde und

Yet if we take a closer look at the argumentation of Caecilius, we see that, despite all the praise for the traditional religion, something has been lost, and that is the experience of divine presence: "the mediocrity of human intelligence is so far from (the capacity of) divine investigation," he says, "that neither is it given us to know, nor is it permitted to search, nor is it religious to ravish, the things that are supported in suspense in the heaven above us, nor the things which are deeply submerged below the earth."²⁷ Caecilius concludes: "Thus either an uncertain truth is hidden from us, and kept back; or, which is rather to be believed, in these various and wayward chances, fortune, unrestrained by laws, is ruling over us."²⁸

But, as so often, from skepticism follows almost naturally a conservative attitude that also applies to religion:

Since, then, either fortune is certain or nature is uncertain, how much more reverential and better it is, as the high priests of truth, to receive the teaching of your ancestors, to cultivate the religions handed down to you, to adore the gods whom you were first trained by your parents to fear rather than to know with familiarity; not to assert an opinion concerning the deities, but to believe your forefathers, who, while the age was still untrained in the birth-times of the world itself, deserved to have gods either propitious to them, or as their kings.²⁹

It is easy to discern that the certainty about divine care is replaced by the experience of the ineffable vicissitudes of fortune. What remains for the pagan aristocrat is to insist on the tradition and the political utility of the ancient cult. History proves, Caecilius says, that the Roman religion is ancient (*vetusta*), useful (*utilis*), and wholesome (*salubris*).³⁰ Yet, it does not prove that the gods really exist. The question of truth is raised, but it finds no answer.

What I want to emphasize is that the questions of truth and utility were not meaningful questions in earlier republican times. The senatorial decree against the Bacchanals appealed neither to truth nor to utility but sought to protect the Civitas, the community of gods and citizens. The most important question of Roman religion was: How can we do justice to the gods? What can we do to be in good relations with the gods in order to deserve their care? When, at the end of the republic, the Roman aristocrats

Verschworung? Die Bacchanalien-Prozesse des Jahres 186 v. Chr.," in *Große Prozesse der römischen Antike*, ed. Ulrich Manthe and Jürgen von Ungern-Sternberg (München: Beck, 1997), 68; R. A. Bauman, "The Suppression of the Bacchanals: Five Questions," *Historia* 39, no. 3 (1990): 342–43.

27. Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, 5, 5.

29. Ibid., 6, 1.

28. Ibid., 5, 13.

30. Ibid., 8, 1.

successively lost their political influence and their capability to take care of the *Res Publica*, they also lost their sense of the guiding assistance of divine care.

One of the possible reactions was skepticism. The literary model for this attitude, used by Minucius and many other authors of the period, was Cicero's dialogue *On the Nature of the Gods*, written after Cicero was removed from office and exiled.³¹ It differs significantly from the treatment of religion in the speeches and treatises he wrote as a senator. As long as Cicero was allowed to care for the *Res Publica*, he professed the traditional creed of civil religion; whether he personally experienced the numinous forces he is speaking of is not important at this point. In his commentary on the soothsayers' responses to questions put to them by the senate, he says: "And, indeed, who is so witless that, when he gazes up into heaven, he fails to see that gods exist . . . ? Or, who, once convinced that divinity does exist, can fail at the same time to be convinced that it is by its power (*numen*) that this great empire has been created, extended, and sustained?"³²

In *On the Nature of the Gods*, however, Cicero takes a skeptical view on religion; as he discusses the various opinions of the philosophers, however, he makes clear that, for reasons of political utility, neither the existence of the gods nor the civil religion may be publicly questioned.³³ But Cicero even sets limits on the esoteric philosophical discussion, since there is one philosophy that no responsible Roman could ever accept, namely, Epicureanism. The epicurean view that the gods exist, but do not care about humans, destroys all Roman order and virtue. Cicero writes: "There are and have always been philosophers who believe that the gods have no concern (*procuratio*) whatever with the affairs of man. But if this belief is true, what becomes of piety, of reverence and of religion (*quae potest esse pietas, quae sanctitas, quae religio*)?"³⁴

The skeptic Cicero concludes the dialogue that we do not know the truth about the gods; but the Stoic idea of divine providence seems more likely to be true (*verisimilis*)³⁵ because it conforms best with the civil reli-

31. For Minucius's dependence on Cicero, see Carl Becker, *Der "Octavius" des Minucius Felix. Heidnische Philosophie und christliche Apologetik* (München: Beck, 1967), 10.

32. Cicero, *De haruspium responsis oratio*, 9.19, trans. N. H. Watts, 341.

33. Cicero, *De natura deorum*, I.61.

34. Cicero, *De natura deorum*, I.3; cited from Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, trans. Horace C. P. McGregor, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1984), 70; cf. the more detailed refutation of Epicureanism in I.115–124.

35. *Ibid.*, III.95.

gion, which has proved useful. This inconsistency between the esoteric and the exoteric treatment of religion and this tension between philosophical knowledge and political responsibility was clearly discerned by the Christian writers and used as a point of attack. In the dialogue of Minucius, the Christian Octavius accuses his pagan counterpart of varying "at one time from believing the gods, at another time to being in a state of hesitation on the subject."³⁶ In *The City of God*, Augustine provides a variety of examples for the inconsistent religious existence of pagan intellectuals. Varro wrote that, if he could found the city anew, he would choose other gods. But he held it necessary for the order of the city that the Romans worship the gods of their ancestors. Cicero, who was an augur himself, laughed about augury if he spoke to educated people.³⁷ Finally, Augustine cites Seneca's lost *Dialogue on Superstition*, which displays exactly the same mixture of skepticism and conservative *raison d'état* as we find it in the speech of the pagan in Minucius Felix: "with respect to these sacred rites of the civil religion, Seneca preferred, as the best course to be followed by a wise man, to feign respect for them in act, but to have no real regard for them at heart. 'All which things,' he says, 'a wise man will observe as being commanded by the laws, but not as being pleasing to the gods.'"³⁸

For reasons of political utility, this separation between public behavior and private thought might have appeared as unavoidable to a pagan intellectual; for Christians, it was unacceptable. They were in possession of the Gospel that revealed the true God. And therefore they had a true religion (*vera religio*), a new concept that first appears in the writings of Minucius Felix, Tertullian, and Lactantius. The basic truth that Christ revealed to mankind is eternal life and eternal happiness in the beyond.³⁹ And from this perspective all Roman gods are useless. Even if they are capable of fulfilling some earthly desires and of providing some temporal goods, they are not in the position to grant eternal life. None of Christian writers of the period ever said that the deities of the Roman Pantheon do not exist at all; however, they lose their divine status and sink to the rank of demons. From the perspective of true religion, civil religion is simply a false

36. Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, 16.2.

37. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. G. E. McCracken, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957), IV.31.

38. *Ibid.*, VI.10.

39. Lactantius, *Epitome Divinarum institutionum*, ed. Eberhard Heck and Antonie Wlosok (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1994), 47.1.

religion (*religio falsa*), as it is most clearly expressed in Lactantius.⁴⁰ From the perspective of truth, the old age of the Roman religion is no longer a criterion for its dignity. In his sketch of an ideal religious law, given in *The Laws*, Cicero prescribes: "No one shall have gods of his own, whether new or foreign, unless they have been officially brought in. In private they shall worship those gods whose worship has been handed down in its proper form by their forefathers. . . . They shall preserve the rituals of their family and fathers. They shall worship as gods those who have always been considered divine."⁴¹ But now Lactantius asks: the religious customs might have been handed down from the ancestors for centuries; but what if the ancestors were foolish and misled by demonic deceptions?⁴² In the eyes of the Christian writer, all the considerations of Roman thinkers about the utility of religious traditions appear as mere opportunism.

Nevertheless, the political question remains unsolved in the texts of the pre-Constantinian period. The Christians defend themselves against the charge of cruel sacrifices and obscenities; but they have nothing to say in justification of the charge that they undermine the public order, except that they do not care. In his *Apologeticum*, Tertullian refutes the equation between Christians and illicit groups such as the Bacchantes, but he also refuses any kind of political responsibility:

Ought not Christians . . . to receive not merely a somewhat milder treatment, but to have a place among the law-tolerated societies, seeing they are not chargeable with any such crimes as are commonly dreaded from societies of the illicit class? For, unless I mistake the matter, the prevention of such associations is based on a prudential regard to public order, that the state may not be divided into parties, which would naturally lead to disturbance in the electoral assemblies, the councils, the curiae, the special conventions, even in the public shows. . . . But . . . we have no pressing inducement to take part in your public meetings; nor is there anything more foreign to us than the affairs of the state.⁴³

This contempt of politics, which differs decisively from the attitude of most Eastern Church Fathers, can be explained partly by the provenience of the

authors. Minucius Felix, Tertullian, Lactantius, Cyprian, Arnobius, and Augustine were all Africans.⁴⁴ The early Muslim conquest of the Maghreb had the effect of almost completely removing from our consciousness the fact that, between the third and the fifth century, North Africa was the intellectual center of the West. At the periphery of the empire, among the Punic and Lybian populations of Africa Proconsularis, the attitude toward the empire and its representatives was highly ambiguous.

The Controversy over the Cult of Victory

Eric R. Dodds described the third century as "the age of anxiety."⁴⁵ In any case, it was a century with long periods of political chaos and disorder. Persians and Goths exercised pressure on the borders in the East and the North, which led to a successive militarization of the Empire. The so-called soldier emperors, who mostly came from the provinces, were enthroned by acclamation of the troops. The influence of the old Roman and Italian elites declined rapidly, especially in the military.⁴⁶ Yet, the political disorder can also be explained by the lack of a political theology that supported the imperial order. Some emperors tried more or less successfully to base their rule on the oriental cults they imported from their home countries. What these cults had in common was that they were not so much monotheistic as henotheistic; that is, they worshipped one highest god but recognized the existence of other gods. Finally, Constantine decided to base his rule on Christianity and transferred the capital of the empire to Constantinople, the new Christian Rome. It was Eastern Christian writers, first of all Eusebius of Caesarea, who developed an imperial theology in which truth and political utility merged into one. Most Christian theologians of the West, however, did not accept, or only reluctantly accepted, imperial theology—not only because of their African origin, but also because the Western Church had already developed its own political order, including an independent civil jurisdiction and an excellent system of social care. By the fourth century, this order already gradually replaced imperial institu-

40. Ibid., 24.

41. Cicero, *De legibus*, II,19, in Cicero, *The Republic. The Laws*, trans. Neil Rudd. Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 129–30.

42. Lactantius, *Epitome Divinarum institutionum*, 50.1; cf. Lactantius, *Institutiones Divinae*, ed. Pierre Monat. Sources Chrétiennes 204 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1973), V,19.3.

43. Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, 38, in Tertullian, *Apology*, trans. S. Thelwall. Ante-Nicene Fathers 3, American ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989), 45.

44. Cf. Franz Georg Maier, *Die Verwandlung der Mittelmeerwelt* (Augsburg: Weltbild, 1998), 99.

45. Eric R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety: Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marc Aurelius to Constantine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

46. Arnaldo Momigliano, "Introduction: Christianity and the Decline of the Roman Empire," in *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, ed. Arnaldo Momigliano (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964), 8–9.

tions. Consequently, the Church authorities were self-confident enough to refuse integration into the political order of the Empire. Bishop Ambrose of Milan, a powerful consultant to three emperors, made perfectly clear that the emperor is the highest earthly authority, but as a member of the Church he has to obey the bishop. This is the background of what was often perceived as the last great battle between Christian and pagan intellectuals in the West, the controversy over the Altar of Victoria.

In 382, Emperor Gratian decided that the Altar of Victoria, the goddess of victory, had to be removed from the curia, the building on the Forum Romanum where the sessions of the senate took place. Two years later, under Emperor Valentinian II, the rebellion of Maximus and a bad harvest caused a short-term revival of the pagan elites. They argued that the disasters were the revenge of the gods and regained some influence at the court of the emperor. Symmachus, a representative of the pagan party in the senate, wrote his *Third Relatio*. In this letter to Emperor Valentinian, he dares to demand no less than the restoration of the ancient cult, which, as he writes, had been so useful for the Res Publica.⁴⁷ Moreover, being a member of the college of pontiffs, he almost appears to be most concerned about the loss of all the tax and property privileges that the pagan priests had previously enjoyed. So he calls on the emperor to give them back.⁴⁸ In the *Third Relatio* we find all the arguments of political utility that we already know. The Altar of Victory, Symmachus says, ensures the morality and concord of the people and guarantees military success.⁴⁹

But again something seems to have changed. Symmachus writes: "It is just that all worship should be considered as one. We look on the same stars, the sky is common, the same world surrounds us. What difference does it make by what pains each seeks the truth?"⁵⁰ "The divine Mind has

47. "Repetimus igitur religionum statum, qui rei publicae diu profuit." Symmachus, *Relatio III*, 3, in Richard Klein, *Der Streit um den Victoriaaltar. Die dritte Relatio des Symmachus und die Briefe 17, 18 und 57 des Mailänder Bischofs Ambrosius* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1972), 100.

48. Symmachus, *Relatio III*, 11–18; cf. Richard Klein, "Die Romidee bei Symmachus. Claudian und Prudentius," in *Colloque Genevois sur Symmaque à l'occasion du mille six centième anniversaire du conflit de l'autel de la Victoire*, ed. F. Paschoud (Paris: Société d'Édition "Les Belles Lettres," 1986), 120. The emphasis on the financial issue is understandable given the fact that, as Ambrose correctly points out in his reply (*Epistula XVIII*, 8–16), the pagan cult could survive only on public subventions while the Church at this time received only minor subsidies. Cf. Hans von Campenhansen, *Lateinische Kirchenväter* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1986), 92.

49. Symmachus, *Relatio III*, 4–6.

50. Symmachus, *Relatio III*, 10, in Ambrose, *Some of the Principal Works of Ambrose*, trans.

distributed different guardians and different cults to different cities. As souls are separately given to infants as they are born, so to peoples the genius of their destiny."⁵¹ This paganism is identical neither with the polytheist piety of the Roman republic nor with the skeptic conservatism of Cicero or the intellectuals of the Augustan age. Paradoxically, Symmachus justifies his polytheism with the monotheistic philosophy of Neo-Platonism.⁵² Like the Christians, he appeals to truth. The providence of the divine Mind (*mens divina*) gave different cults to different peoples so that there would be a variety of ways to search for the divine truth.

Yet this political theology was not an intellectual construct of Symmachus. Just a few decades earlier the same mixture of Neo-Platonic metaphysics and polytheism had served as an ideological basis for the rule of Emperor Julian, commonly known as the Apostate. But Julian's religious policy was not apostasy; it was an innovative attempt to reconcile the ancient cult with imperial rule. In his *Against the Galileans*, Julian says: "Our writers say that the creator is the common father and king of all things, but that the other functions have been assigned by him to the national gods of the peoples and gods that protect the cities; every one of whom administers his own department in accordance with his own nature."⁵³

Whether this political theology could have been a possible alternative to Christianity is an academic question. Its failure is a historical fact. Probably Neoplatonic philosophy was simply too sophisticated to convince the masses. The truth of Neoplatonic mysticism had to be sought by meditation and intellectual efforts, whereas the Christian truth was revealed and at hand. Bishop Ambrose was quite aware of this advantage. In his *Letter XVIII*, which addresses the emperor and comments on the *Third Relatio* of Symmachus, he writes: "By one road, says he [Symmachus], one cannot attain to so great a secret. What you know not, that we know by the voice of God. And what you seek by fancies, we have found out from the very Wisdom and Truth of God. Your ways, therefore, do not agree with ours."⁵⁴

Of course, Symmachus does not restrict his argument to truth. *Accedit*

H. de Romestin, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series X*, reprint (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans 1989), 414.

51. Symmachus, *Relatio III*, 8, in Ambrose, 415.

52. Cf. Manfred Fuhrmann, *Rom in der Spätantike. Porträt einer Epoche* (Munich: Artemis and Winkler, 1994), 73–75.

53. Cited from Arnaldo Momigliano, "The Disadvantages of Monotheism for a Universal State," *Classical Philology* 81, no. 4 (October 1986): 293.

54. Ambrosius, *Epistula XVIII*, 8, in Ambrose, 418.

utilitas are the two words, he hastens to add: "Here comes in the proof from advantage, which most of all vouches to man for the gods. For, since our reason is wholly clouded, whence does the knowledge of the gods more rightly come to us, than from the memory and evidence of prosperity? Now if a long period gives authority to religious customs, we ought to keep faith with so many centuries, and to follow our ancestors, as they happily followed theirs."⁵⁵

This quotation, however, sounds much more like the skepticism of Cicero and the pagan in Minucius's *Octavius*; and it displays the traditional creed of civil religion. The main arguments for the traditional cult are its utility and its old age. Richard Klein, one of the leading Symmachus scholars, therefore warns not to overemphasize the Neoplatonic dimension of the *Third Relatio*.⁵⁶ The vast corpus of letters Symmachus left behind does not show any higher philosophical ambitions of its author. Even in the *Third Relatio*, Symmachus shows no major interest in theological disputes, since he concludes his remarks about the *Mens Divina* with the words: "but this discussion is rather for persons at ease."⁵⁷ This interpretation of Klein, which I am inclined to follow, lets the Neoplatonist argument appear as a concession to the contemporary intellectual discourse. However, it shows that Symmachus was more or less aware of the fact that his position was anachronistic. As a member of the senatorial aristocracy he identified the meaning of his existence with the care for the *Res Publica*, according to the *mos maiorum*. This self-image included the protection of the traditional cult. On the other hand, Symmachus had to accept that the senate had long ago lost its authority in religious matters, and he knew that religious policies were increasingly negotiated between the Church authorities and the imperial court. The fact that Symmachus addressed the emperor and his court in Milan instead of the senate in Rome was the clearest sign of the republican institutions' almost complete loss of power.

Undoubtedly, Symmachus was aware that all he could hope for was toleration. When he pleaded for the restoration of the ancient cult, he certainly did not expect the restoration of the ancient religio-political order.⁵⁸

55. Symmachus, *Relatio III*, 8, in Ambrose, 415.

56. Klein, "Die Romidee bei Symmachus, Claudian und Prudentius," 123. Manfred Fuhrmann, on the other hand, thinks that the Neoplatonist dimension is essential to Symmachus's argument. Fuhrmann, *Rom in der Spätantike*, 73–75.

57. Symmachus, *Relatio III*, 10; transl. de Romestin, 415.

58. This becomes manifest in these sentences: "Let the rulers of each sect and of each opinion

The experience of decline is clearly articulated, when in the *Third Relatio* the personified Roma complains: "Have I been reserved for this, that in my old age I should be blamed? I will consider what it is thought should be set in order, but tardy and discreditable is the reformation of old age." In other words, Roma is simply too old to convert to Christianity. When Symmachus adds, "We ask, then, for peace for the gods of our fathers and of our country," it almost sounds as if he desired not much more than a decent and undisturbed retirement for the ancient gods and the pagan aristocracy.

There is, however, evidence that Christian aristocrats in the senate as well as in the council of the emperor showed sympathies for Symmachus's case. As modern scholars, such as Glen W. Bowersock, have pointed out, the leading class was not simply divided into pagans and Christians. Obviously, many Christian members of the senatorial aristocracy preserved, or, in case they were only newly promoted to the senatorial rank, adopted, the traditional self-image. Consequently, they were not inclined to destroy the cult of "their" ancestors.⁵⁹ The senatorial aristocracy still possessed a kind of class identity; friendship between Christian and pagan members was not unusual. In private life, even the two opponents Symmachus and Ambrose, the latter also stemming from the senatorial aristocracy, got along quite well. Therefore it is no surprise that, in the first place, the council of Valentinian II decided in favor of Symmachus.

Yet this was the moment for Bishop Ambrose to intervene. He wrote two letters to the young emperor of the West, who at this time was only fourteen years old. *Epistula XVII* was written before Ambrose had read the *Relatio* of Symmachus. The opening paragraphs appear like a manifesto of the catholic policy which was to govern the Western society in the following centuries:

As all men who live under the Roman sway engage in military service under you, the Emperors and Princes of the world, so too do you yourselves owe service to Almighty God and our holy faith. For salvation is not sure unless everyone worship in truth the true God, that is the God of the Christians, under Whose

be counted up; a late one [i.e. Julian the Apostate] practised the ceremonies of his ancestors, a later [Valentinian I] did not put them away. If the religion of old times does not make a precedent, let the connivance of the last [i.e. the emperors Valentinian I and Valens] do so" (Symmachus, *Relatio III*, 3, in Ambrose, 414). For a similar interpretation see Campenhausen, *Lateinische Kirchenväter*, 91.

59. Glen W. Bowersock, "Symmachus and Ausonius," in *Colloque Genevois sur Symmaque à l'occasion du mille six centième anniversaire du conflit de l'autel de la Victoire*, ed. F. Paschoud (Paris: Société d'Édition "Les Belles Lettres," 1986), 4–5.

sway are all things; for He alone is the true God, Who is to be worshipped from the bottom of the heart; for "the gods of the heathen," as Scripture says, "are devils." Now everyone is a soldier of this true God, and he who receives and worships Him in his inmost spirit, does not bring to His service dissimulation, or pretence, but earnest faith and devotion. And if, in fine, he does not attain to this, at least he ought not to give any countenance to the worship of idols and to profane ceremonies. For no one deceives God, to whom all things, even the hidden things of the heart, are manifest.⁶⁰

In sum: the ruler is not sovereign, but subject to the will of the one true god (*deus verus*), who does not accept tolerance toward the pagan cult. To know the will of god, however, is the office of the bishop and not of the emperor. Should the emperor resist the will of the bishops they would refuse the Eucharist, and consequently his salvation would be endangered. "If it were a civil cause," Ambrose writes, "the right of reply would be reserved for the opposing party; it is a religious cause, and I the bishop make a claim. [. . .] Certainly if anything else is decreed, we bishops cannot contentedly suffer it and take no notice; you indeed may come to the church, but will find either no priest there, or one who will resist you."⁶¹

A few years later, when Theodosius ruled the Western Empire, the threat of excommunication proved to be a serious measure to discipline the ruler. The success of this policy of truth also meant the final defeat of traditional civil religion. Where the revelation of truth is accepted, the argument of utility does not count anymore, as Ambrose makes clear: "Ponder well, I pray you, and examine the sect of the heathen, their utterances, sound, weighty, and grand, but defend what is without capacity for truth."⁶²

Conclusion

What we can observe in the texts of the third and fourth century is humans who seek for existential consistency, that is, consistency between experiences in the political and the numinous sphere. The polytheistic cult was the cult of the republic and, as Arnaldo Momigliano has shown, we do not find a theorist in this period who successfully achieved the reconciliation of traditional polytheism and imperial rule.⁶³ The multiplicity of

60. Ambrosius, *Epistula XVII*, 1–2, in Ambrose, 411–12.

61. Ambrosius, *Epistula XVII*, 13, in Ambrose, 413.

62. Ambrosius, *Epistula XVIII*, 2, in Ambrose, 417.

63. Momigliano, "Disadvantages of Monotheism," 296.

political responsibilities in the republic conformed to the multiplicity of responsibilities in a polytheist pantheon but conflicted with the experience that one emperor takes care of virtually the whole world. In this conflict, the questions of truth and utility gain relevance. The experience of universal political unity suggests unity in the numinous sphere, the existence of one true god who takes care of all mankind. In its turn, the experience of a one true divine ruler suggests a uniform imperial order. Under the same circumstances, the pagan elites, who did not want to partake in the religious transformation, emphasized the political utility of their cult. As we know, their efforts were ultimately futile. Augustine's *City of God* determined the self-understanding of the Western civilization for the next one thousand years. But if we take a closer look at the Church Father's terminology, we see that the symbolical cosmos of the ancient religion was not destroyed but was transformed under the signs of truth.

One could even say that Augustine, in a certain sense, achieved what seemed to be impossible, namely the reconciliation of truth and republic. Augustine speaks of the true religion (*vera religio*) worshiped by the true citizens (*cives veri*) in a truer city (*civitas verior*). The city of God is truer, because it is the mystical community of the true believers and not identical with any visible community. Political utility has not disappeared, but it is now completely secularized and restricted to the earthly city, the *civitas terrena*. At least in theory, religion is no longer useful for politics, but politics is useful for religion. It is to a large extent Ambrose's achievement that already Theodosius saw his highest office in protection of the Catholic Church and the unity of the orthodox faith.⁶⁴ In Augustine's mirror of princes, modeled upon the example of Theodosius, the emperor spreads Christianity over the world and destroys the pagan cults.⁶⁵ But the final goal of his life is not to achieve superiority in this world, but to dwell among equals in the heavenly city, which Augustine describes as the true republic.⁶⁶

64. Charles N. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2003), 360–62.

65. Augustine, *The City of God*, V, 24–26.

66. "True justice, however, exists only in that republic whose Founder and Ruler is Christ, if you please to call it too a republic, since we cannot deny that it is a people's estate" (Augustine, *The City of God*, II, 21).